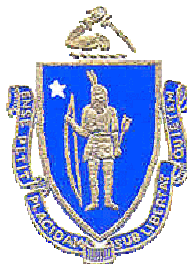




**MASSACHUSETTS COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

## **Greater Lowell Public Hearing Summary Report**

**February 25, 2004  
4:30-6:30 p.m.  
Armand Mercier Center**



The Charles F. Hurley Building  
19 Staniford St., 6<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Boston, MA 02114  
Phone: 617-626-6520  
Fax: 617-626-6530  
E-Mail: [mcsw@state.ma.us](mailto:mcsw@state.ma.us)  
Web: [www.mass.gov/women](http://www.mass.gov/women)

## **Preface**

On February 25, 2004, the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women held its thirteenth public hearing at the Armand Mercier Center in Lowell.

The purpose of this hearing was for Commissioners to learn what matters most to the women of Massachusetts. Suggested topics included: What issues are most important to the women of Greater Lowell? Where do gaps or barriers in service exist? What do the women of Greater Lowell need most?

The Commission appreciates the participation by the citizens of this region. The Commission will share the input obtained with state and municipal legislators in the hopes that the results from this hearing will be utilized to create positive change for women of Lowell and the Commonwealth.

## **Attendees**

### **Commissioners**

Marianne Fleckner, Chair  
Nilka Alvarez-Rodriguez  
Kathleen Casavant  
Martie Chadwick  
Donna Finneran  
Mary Clare Higgins  
Helen Jackson  
Dianne Luby  
Susana Segat  
Kateri Walsh

### **MCSW Staff**

Linda Brantley, Executive Director  
Paula Daddona, Program Manager  
Lisa Martin, Administrative Assistant

### **Elected Officials**

Jacqueline Schrackertz, Tyngsboro Board of Selectmen

### **Community participants**

Audrey Ambrosino, Lowell National Historical Park  
Nancy Arseneaux, Lowell Community Health Center, Women Services  
Samantha Bo, Lowell Telecommunications Corporation  
Shirley Buckjine, Community Teamwork  
Nicole Burns, House of Hope  
Deb Chausse, House of Hope  
Bora Chiemroom, LCHC Teen Coalition  
Judy Coughlin, Merrimack Valley Central Labor Council  
Maria Cunhc, Middlesex Community College  
Judy Coughlin, Merrimack Valley Central Labor Council  
Cynthia deCastro, IBEW 1505, MVCLC  
Carol Dunlen, Girls Incorporated of Greater Lowell  
Victoria Fahlberg, One Lowell Coalition  
Vicki Fanny, House of Hope  
Thary Hang, LCHC Teen Coalition  
Kan Homley, YWCA of Greater Lowell  
Colleen Kellner  
Kathy Kelly, Alternative House  
Cindy Khan, LCHC Teen Coalition  
Niem Nay-Kref, Southeast Asian Bilingual Advocates, Inc.  
Vanny Lao, YWCA of Greater Lowell

Betty Lapointe, IBEW 1505  
**Community participants continued:**

Julie Lemeie, House of Hope  
Kim Leng Lee  
Kathy Muldoon, City of Lowell DPD- Enterprise Community  
Soady Ouch, YWCA of Greater Lowell  
Nancy Peacock  
John Rich, Department of Labor, Apprentice Training  
JoJo Scharmer, House of Hope  
Ly Sinob  
Gale Smith  
David Sullivan, Department of Employment and Training  
Christine Thanongsinh, LHCH Teen Coalition  
Meredith Trueblood, Rape Crisis Center Service Lowell  
Peter VanDudenson, Fatherhood Coalition  
Elizabeth Vergaron, House of Hope  
Ted Vocell  
Susan Wining, Labor Extension, UMASS Lowell

## **Welcome and Introduction: Marianne Fleckner, MCSW Chair**

Chair Fleckner welcomed members of the community to the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women's (MCSW) public hearing.

Chair Fleckner then introduced the MCSW Commissioners in attendance as well as Linda Brantley, MCSW Executive Director and the Commission staff.

Chair Fleckner explained that the testimony at the hearing would be compiled into a summary report that would be distributed to hearing participants, the Governor, Senate President, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Caucus of Women Legislators, policymakers and other key organizations and individuals. It is hoped that the information will be utilized to create positive change for women of the Commonwealth.

Chair Fleckner then discussed the ground rules for testimony and explained that the testimonies would be heard in the order people signed in at the registration desk and that all testimonies would be recorded.

## **Summary of Testimony**

*The following summaries are based on notes from the hearing, the audiocassette recording of the testimony and submitted written testimony.*

### **Cynthia deCastro**

#### **IBEW 1505 and the Merrimack Valley Central Labor Council**

Ms. deCastro spoke about attitude as a vitally important issue facing women. She fears that the stereotype of the “little women going out to supplement the so-called real bread-winner” is harmful and inaccurate.

She espoused the idea of respect for women in the workplace and their contributions to society. As a woman in a union job, she testified that she sees this stereotype keeps women from attaining supervisory and upper management jobs. She stated that she has been overlooked for overtime “not because of my inability to do my a job, but because a male counterpart needed the extra money.” Ms. deCastro believes that that her struggle, and the struggle of women to make enough money to live on is often overlooked.

She further noted that women should be seen as partners in our “two paycheck society” and thus, warrant respect in the workplace. “Working women need to appreciate ourselves and our own contributions to society and our families... We need society to stand up and take notice. The struggle for equal opportunity is as real today as it was in my mother’s day.”

### **Commissioner Nilka Alvarez-Rodriguez**

Commissioner Alvarez-Rodriguez asked if the union has been able to help with this issue? For instance, she said, by offering a program to change attitudes in the workplace.

Ms. deCastro replied that there is nothing in place right now.

Commissioner Alvarez-Rodriguez responded that she had two thoughts on this issue.

- 1) To see how labor unions could help make management more responsive to this issue.
- 2) To increase interest from Workforce Investment Boards to provide better paying jobs for women, as well as providing sensitivity training for employers on gender and the workplace.

### **Commissioner Kateri Walsh**

Commissioner Walsh asked Ms. deCastro if she had any suggestions on how to change the attitude with which she is concerned.

Ms. deCastro responded, "I think it is so difficult because it is imbedded in our culture. I think affirmative action, the Equal Opportunity Act, things of that nature need to be worked on, strengthened and enforced."

Commissioner Walsh inquired if there was a Women's Commission in Lowell, but Ms. deCastro did not know (There is not). Commissioner Walsh explained that her reason for asking was that many Commissions, such as Springfield, have recognition events for women in their fields. She feels that recognition is a great place to start changing this attitude.

### **Commissioner Luby**

Commissioner Luby responded that she thinks that the MCSW publication on "How to Get Appointed to Boards and Commissions" would be helpful in this situation. "I think part of what women have to do is nominate women to sit on councils, boards, and committees where their voices can be heard at a policy-making level."

### **Judy Coughlin**

#### ***Merrimack Valley Central Labor Council***

Ms. Coughlin stated she was Vice President of the MVCLC and also works at UMASS Lowell Labor Extension, managing a \$2.5 billion dollar H1B grant. The grant is to create a career ladder for employees of Lucent in the Merrimack Valley. "The goal is to get a pool of trained workers who could move up the ladder at Lucent."

She noted, however, that Lucent began laying off employees and by the fall of 2002, 90 percent of the 3,000 CDWA 1365 members were laid off. So they had to modify the grant to help dislocated workers, because there was no longer a place for these workers to climb the ladder.

The H1B grant requires the application of high-technology skills. Since the layoffs, Ms. Coughlin has been speaking to people who were in their training program to see what has happened since their layoff. She has been discouraged to find that despite the high-level skills they had, they could not get jobs. "The Merrimack Valley has a really talented pool of workers but we don't have any jobs for them."

What Ms. Coughlin thinks is needed is legislation that protects workers and holds companies that receive tax incentives to create jobs to be held accountable to keep those jobs running after the incentives run out. She also called for women-centered economic development.

**Commissioner Kathleen Casavant**

Commissioner Casavant made the connection between issues such as domestic violence, childcare, and the intricacies of women's economies. She also reiterated Ms. Coughlin's point on the importance of jobs. In Commissioner Casavant's opinion "A good job is the key to dealing with many of the issues raised tonight as well as at past hearings. Do women have decent jobs? Can they provide for their families? We want women to not need to worry about affordability of childcare and violence in the home (because it no longer comes down to having no authority). She liked the idea of women-centered economic development.

**Commissioner Nilka Alvarez-Rodriguez**

Commissioner Alvarez-Rodriguez asked if labor councils work with the Workforce Investment Board. When told that they have two people on the board, Commissioner Alvarez-Rodriguez noted that the Commission is planning create geographical Advisory Councils to the MCSW that people could become part of to get the attention needed for this problem. She also commented on the incentive programs Ms. Coughlin brought up and noted often when the incentives run out, the company leaves and the area has to deal with the fallout.

**Commission Chair Marianne Fleckner**

Before moving on to the next speaker, Commissioner Fleckner brought up the Commission's plans to do a Budget Analysis. The Budget Analysis will test the Commission's hypothesis that women and families have been disproportionately affected by state budget cuts. She invited the Labor Extension to contribute the recent data it has on women and the budget cuts to this research.

**Kathy Kelly*****Alternative House***

Ms. Kelly thanked the MCSW for coming to Lowell. She is an executive director of an emergency shelter for victims of domestic violence. She spoke of the importance of fighting domestic violence.

She called for more money for transitional housing to get women out of emergency shelter and to increase the amount of permanent affordable housing to give women and children stability. She said that specialized training is needed to deal with the safety issues that come up over things like children's court-ordered visits with the abuser. Lastly, she noted the importance of a living wage that would allow women to support themselves and their children so they can leave the abuser and not get stuck in the shelter system.



“We need to change attitudes that allow women to be re-victimized by law-enforcement and criminal justice agencies,” she said.

**Commissioner Susana Segat**

The Commissioner conveyed that the Commission has two independent Task Forces, including one on domestic violence. She agreed that good, trained people are needed in transitional programs.

**Colleen Kellner**

Ms. Kellner stated her concern that the court system is an agent of re-victimization of abused women. “Just because the hitting stops doesn’t mean the abuse stops. The Courts need to change to acknowledge psychological abuse... For women to be safe they can not be safe only physically, but also psychologically.”

She noted that there are cases where a judge does not question a woman dropping a restraining order on her abuser closely enough to ensure that she is truly willingly doing this.

**Ly Sinob**

(With the aid of an interpreter)

Ms. Sinob said she emigrated from Cambodia and apologized for her limited English skills. She talked about having a young son and an ill husband and the difficulties she faced trying to support her family.

She fears that her lack of skills and English lead her only to low paying jobs that will not be enough to support her family. “I face the challenge of not having the opportunity for jobs that will pay the rent and other living costs. I am here to speak for all women who face this problem.”

**Commission Chair Marianne Fleckner**

The Commissioner told Ms. Sinob to not apologize for her limited English and that the Commission was so grateful that she spoke and shared her experience with them.

**Deb Chausse**

***House of Hope***

Ms. Chausse spoke of the effect of high housing costs on her community. She compared 20 years ago there being only two shelters in the state with swift re-housing turnaround. Today there are 1,000 shelters in Massachusetts, 1,4000 homeless families, and 500 families calling motels home.

“The affordability of housing hasn’t matched our socioeconomic reality in a long time. I call on the MCSW to look at the cuts to housing of last year,

and this year's unprecedented allowance of the Department of Transitional Assistance to change the rules mid-year without legislative approval."

**Commissioner Segat**

The Commissioner asked how the budget cuts affect her program.

Ms. Chausse replied that the bulk of her budget is from the Department of Transitional Assistance, but that they also receive about \$100,000 dollars from the community along with federal funds. This past cycle she saw five percent of her state funds leave.

**Commissioner Marianne Fleckner**

Commissioner Fleckner asked Ms. Chausse to send information on this to the Commission.

**Commissioner Dianne Luby**

Commissioner Luby asked for an overview of housing vouchers.

Ms. Chausse responded that some regions do not have a great need for vouchers so they have unused vouchers they turn into the state. She added that rather than reallocating these vouchers to areas that need them desperately, the state revokes the vouchers.

**Peter VanDudenson**

***Fatherhood Coalition***

Mr. VanDudenson remarked that he wondered if the DTA could do off-budget financing for transitional housing- like a lottery. He has sent a letter about it to the Governor.

Commission Walsh asked if he received a response and he said no.

**Niem Nay-Kref**

***Southeast Asian Bilingual Advocates, Inc.***

Ms. Nay-Kref's organization works on cardiovascular disease and diabetes increases in the Southeast Asian community in the Lowell area. She said her agency serves over 200 people, 70 percent of whom are women.

Ms. Nay-Kref noted that these problems and the issue of lack of access to healthcare lead to problems in getting a job. "If your diabetes goes untreated for instance, it can be debilitating," she said.

“Access to healthcare is a big problem if you do not understand the healthcare system. Even if you do speak English, which many of these people do not, it can be impossible to learn,” she added

With the loss of manufacturing jobs in the region, the less skilled workers, especially those with limited English, cannot find jobs. “They are also not always eligible for Medicaid or other social health services and this is a serious problem,” she said. “They worry about how to get jobs when you cannot drive because you cannot speak English enough to get a license. They worry about eldercare also,” she added.

**Commissioner Helen Jackson**

Commissioner Jackson asked if the local hospitals help in any way.

Ms. Nay-Kref responded that there is some free access, but a portion of it must still be paid, which they cannot always afford. And, then, advanced services such as radiology are not covered at all and are quite expensive.

The Commissioner suggested that many hospitals would accept a minimal payment of even two dollars a week for services. She hopes that such a deal could be helpful to the women Ms. Nay-Kref serves.

**Commissioner Alvarez-Rodriguez**

Commissioner Alvarez-Rodriguez mentioned there is an Executive Office for Elder Care that serves the Merrimack Valley by bringing together the elderly and disability care. She also believes it is very important to have cultural care as part of healthcare.

Ms. Nay-Kref agreed that culture should be considered in healthcare. She also mentioned that in Cambodia, due to a shorter lifespan, 50 is considered elderly.

The Commissioner asked why there is such a problem with heart disease and diabetes in immigrants. Ms. Nay-Kref responded that it could be that here food is too available and there is not as much labor-intensive work.

**Commissioner Dianne Luby**

Commissioner Luby asked if translation services were readily available at hospitals and healthcare providers.

Ms. Nay-Kref said that a 2001 law requires hospitals to have translators. But she feels a bigger problem is the lack of tracking for the health problems in the Southeast Asian community.

**Soady Ouch*****YWCA of Greater Lowell***

Ms. Ouch works with Cambodian women and came on their behalf because many felt afraid or ashamed to talk to the Commission. The most important issue for her is money for education that will give these women the language and job skills necessary to participate fully in the community at large.

She echoed Commission Chair Fleckner's praise of the women with limited English who have spoken, seeing it not only as necessary, but beneficial. "Cambodian women need to take a leadership role. They need education to get involved in society so that they can change it."

**Commissioner Fleckner**

The Commissioner told the speaker, "You may be physically small, but your voice is very powerful—don't stop."

**Commissioner Mary Clare Higgins**

"MCSW is commissioning a study of budget cuts (reference to the upcoming budget analysis report) to give you things to advocate for within the next budget cycle, and for legislators who don't understand the impact of these cuts. It is important that all those who can be registered to vote. It is your single best tool to make change."

Ms. Ouch responded that they are trying to get people registered to vote, but there is the problem of needing citizenship first.

Commissioner Alvarez-Rodriguez suggested that she contact Congressman Marty Meehan of Greater Lowell for assistance with immigration and processing forms.

**Victoria Fahlberg*****One Lowell Coalition***

Ms. Fahlberg explained that her organization's purpose is to promote integration in Lowell, since they have a population that is 50 percent immigrants. Her primary concern is with 100 percent budget cuts last year to the Refugee and Immigrant Safety Empowerment Program (RISE).

"This was the first program of its kind with specific domestic violence advocates for specific language groups. Women with language and cultural barriers were served with this program and because it was 100 percent cut last year it cannot even be put on the docket this year."

She fears that women with no English are unlikely to receive help with domestic violence with the demise of RISE. Even with RISE there was not

enough help- Lowell has over 7,500 Portuguese and 7,500-10,000 Brazilians and they never had a Portuguese-speaking advocate she said.

“Massachusetts has the seventh largest immigrant/refugee population in the United States and these budget cuts have affected this population disproportionately,” Fahlberg noted.

Commissioner Fleckner responded that she is familiar with RISE and requests that a letter imparting the impact of the demise of RISE be sent to the Commission.

Ms. Fahlberg responded, “The RISE program served many women and it was cost-effective. There was a fear that we would be hit with cuts because of that cost-effectiveness.”

**Christine Thanongsinh**  
***LHCH Teen Coalition***

Ms. Thanongsinh has been a youth organizer for three years. The budget cuts of last year affected programs aimed at teenagers. There was a proven reduction in the pregnancy rate with the programs aimed at preventing teenage pregnancy. She fears that the progress will be undone with these cuts.

**Thary Hang**  
***LCHC Teen Coalition***

Ms. Hang wants teen pregnancy and family planning programs to be funded.

“The pregnancy rate in Lowell is 153 percent higher than the state rate. Young parents face many challenges, such as housing, health care- we need these prevention programs.”

**Cindy Khan**  
***LCHC Teen Coalition***

“This program taught me a lot. I am a Cambodian and this is not something I felt comfortable talking to my parents about. This program teaches teens things they need to know, talks to them, helps them, gives them someone to talk to about these matters.”

Ms. Thanongsinh adds that they have a new initiative called League of Youth that has a teen manager, an adult who supports them and gives them information, and then teens go to middle schools to support and inform them. It is about getting teens educated and involved which is hard to do. This program let her do that.

### **Closing Remarks**

Chair Fleckner thanked everyone who came to the public hearing and assured them that their voices had been heard. She encouraged people to fill out surveys and to nominate women for the MCSW First Annual Unsung Heroine Award.